

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

Tue. December 5, The 899th Sundry Subscription Concert

Thu. December 7, The 7th Weekday Afternoon Concert

Dmitry Kabalevsky (1904-1987) "Colas Breugnon" Overture, op.24

A contemporary of Shostakovich, Kabalevsky also had to follow the strict line of the Soviet regime or risk being censured. In fact, just a few years prior to the premiere of this work, (the opera *Colas Breugnon*), Shostakovich had been criticized for his operatic work, *A Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, in 1936. At that point, Shostakovich chose to steer clear of the genre and instead chose to focus his compositions on works outside of the theatre – seemingly a safer mode of operandi. Kabalevsky, however, chose to go ahead with his opera, which premiered in Leningrad in 1938.

The libretto was based on Romain Rolland's French novel *Le martre de Clemecy*, which seemed a safe enough subject on the surface. The title character, Breugnon is a wood-carver who runs into difficulties with the Duke. The Duke apparently wants a particularly prized wooden sculpture that Breugnon has made of Selina, a woman near and dear to his heart. When Breugnon refuses, the Duke orders all of his remaining sculptures to be burned.

Later, the Duke commissions a statue from the sculptor, only to find when it is unveiled that he has been sculpted sitting backwards on a donkey. Though seemingly a humorous folk-tale at first glance, the reference to exploitations of the commoners by the rulers is thought to have been a subtle statement by the composer against the Soviet regime of the time. Though the libretto was criticized by the regime, Kabalevsky himself escaped censure.

The Overture sets the scene for the opera in 16th Burgandy, painting a picture of Breugnon, full of energy and mischief, perhaps fueled by his feelings of love for Selina as well as his disdain for the Duke. Kabalevsky revised this work in 1953 and 1969. And though the opera itself was never considered a popular success, the Overture has become a favorite of many audiences.

Work composed: 1936-1937

World premiere: February 22, 1938, St. Petersburg (entire performance)

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo), 3 oboes, 3 clarinets, 3 bassoons (3rd doubling on contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussions (xylophone, triangle, field drum, cymbals, bus drum), harp, celesta, strings

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Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)**Piano Concerto No.1 in B-flat minor, op.23***Performed only
on Dec 5.

“Worthless, unplayable... vulgar.” These are the infamous words Nikolai Rubinstein used to describe Tchaikovsky’s First Piano Concerto upon first hearing it on December 24th, 1874. The composer had gone to one of his strongest supporters (and the intended dedicatee of the work) to get the proverbial stamp of approval and instead had his fragile self esteem crushed. In a letter to a friend he described his reaction: “If you only knew...how unbearable it is to offer a friend a dish of his...and they eat and say nothing...” Apparently Rubinstein just sat in silence after hearing the first movement and only gave Tchaikovsky the critical feedback after the composer completed playing the rest of the work. Rubinstein went on to indicate that he would consider performing the work only if the composer were to re-work the piece according to his suggestions, but Tchaikovsky refused.

It was not too long afterwards that Tchaikovsky decided to approach the pianist and conductor, Hans von Bülow, whose response was nearly the opposite reaction. After reading the score, he commented that the work was “original, noble and powerful.” Needless to say von Bülow became the new dedicatee and premiered the work on the opening concert of his American tour in Boston on October 25th, 1875. The concerto was received with great enthusiasm by audiences in the United States, even to the point that the finale was encored for at least one performance in New York.

The introduction opens with the well-known sweeping string melody over the top of the strong piano chordings. Tchaikovsky even includes a full cadenza for the piano in the introduction before the familiar opening melody returns. The main portion of the first movement then goes on to include two themes, the first being a melody that is purportedly based on a Ukranian folk tune Tchaikovsky heard performed at a local fair. The second and third movements are quite short in comparison to the opening movement. The *Andantino* opens with hushed pizzicato tones before the flute introduces the first theme. The second theme is in the style of a scherzo and is based on the French song “Il faut s’amuser, danser et rire” (One must amuse oneself by dancing and laughing). The *Allegro* opens with an energetic theme that comes from the Ukranian folk song “Viydi, viydi Ivanku” (Come, Come Ivanku) and is contrasted with a more lyrical second theme.

It is perhaps most amazing that Rubinstein’s initial reaction has become one of the most often told tales regarding this remarkable work, especially given the favour it has received by audiences and pianists worldwide since then. Eventually Rubinstein even came around and became an advocate of the piece himself, performing it numerous times.

Work composed: 1875 **World premiere:** October 13, 1875, Boston**Instrumentation:** 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, strings**Symphony No. 4 in F minor, op.36**

Tchaikovsky dedicated this piece to his ‘best friend’ Nadezhda von Meck, and to our benefit wrote her at great length, revealing the intent behind his writing of this symphony. Mme von Meck had recently been widowed and, upon discovering Tchaikovsky’s music, as well as his need for financial support, she generously provided this sustenance from afar. It seems the composer appreciated not only her monetary assistance, but depended on correspondence with her for support as well.

At the time that he began writing this work in the spring of 1877, Tchaikovsky faced a major turning point in his personal life. Only a few months earlier he had received his first commission from Mme von Meck, which gave him the freedom to compose without worrying about his financial situation. However, he found himself in a position to be married, against his will it seems, to Antonina, a young student at the Conservatory. The turmoil that enveloped his life at that point became an integral part of his music, as he indicated in his correspondences.

Regarding the opening fanfare, heard throughout the first movement, Tchaikovsky states that it is “the seed of the whole symphony.... This is fate, this is that fateful force which prevents the impulse to happiness from attaining its goal.” The second movement, he stated, was intended to express ‘a weary regret for all that is hopelessly gone’. And in the third movement, the tunes alternate between that of “drunken peasants” and “a street song” representing “the elusive images which rush past in the imagination when you have drunk a little wine and experience the first stage of intoxication.”

In the final movement, Tchaikovsky incorporates the traditional folk song ‘In the field a little birch tree stood’, a reference to his young wife. The ‘fate’ theme, however, returns in full force to indicate the ongoing turmoil in his life, as he explains: “the irrepressible fate again appears and reminds you of yourself.... but others have not even turned around, they have not glanced at you and they have not noticed that you are solitary and sad.” In the end, the composer attempts to parallel Beethoven’s triumphant finale, when he suggests: “If within yourself you find no reasons for joy, look at others. Go among the people. Observe how they can enjoy themselves, surrendering themselves wholeheartedly to joyful feelings.”

Work composed: 1877 **World premiere:** February 10, 1878, Moscow**Instrumentation:** piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussions (bass drum, triangle, cymbals), strings

April L. Racana / Music Specialist at Nishimachi International School where she has taught since 1992. She completed her undergraduate studies at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana (BS/Piano Pedagogy) and her graduate studies at San Francisco State University (MA/Music), as well as a post-graduate fellowship at Northwestern University, and the Japan Studies Program at International Christian University.

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